

5-2018

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Recommended Citation

Meister, Debbi (2018) "Three To Get Ready: Students Justify Peer Response in a Crowded Curriculum," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 33: Iss. 2, Article 10.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.2180>

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Cover Page Footnote

The author revisits a 2009 research project regarding F2F peer responses and (re)discovers that her former students' voices are still relevant and true.

Critical Pedagogy

Three to Get Ready: Students Justify Peer Response in a Crowded Curriculum

DEBBIE MEISTER

As class begins, I grin and direct the juniors and seniors to their assigned three-person peer response teams, and the students grin back. They know they're ready. A few scramble to print their necessary extra copies, but within five minutes, all groups are focused on the writing. It's an intense murmur: three person teams of students, sitting in tight formations, leaning forward, eyes on papers clutched in their hands as one person in each group reads his or her essay aloud while the others listen and read along. As the reader finishes, the other two people begin to write marginalia, and in some cases, the reader begins making notes as well. When the bell rings at the end of the fifty-minute class, the groups are wrapping up. The students, almost without exception were prepared, and all have been engaged and focused for the entire class period, proving to me, yet again, that peer response is a worthwhile process and time well spent in a crowded language arts curriculum. However, to get to this successful point, I have extensively investigated and revised the peer response process and, just as importantly, I asked the students to tell me if peer response sessions assist their revision process. Their positive comments and strong engagement provide the justification to continue the use of peer response.

Why investigate a strategy that is working?

I have long been an advocate of peer response sessions because the students' finished writing after peer response is of better quality than without it. Even the work of the excellent student writers is more polished. However, the sheer number of Common Core State Standards and the Michigan Educational Technology Standards to be addressed made me step back and take a hard look at what I was teaching and how classroom time was being utilized. Could I justify the

amount and genres of literature I was assigning, the quantity and genres of writing, and the technology I was incorporating as time "best" spent in the classroom? Was there anything I needed to eliminate so that something more important could take its place? As I looked at each element of my curriculum and weighed its value, I decided to investigate my use of peer response as a tool to facilitate better student writing, in light of "best use of class time."

I had previously used junior and senior two-person peer response teams, which caused response-day shuffling. Invariably, at least two students were unprepared and at least one student was absent. That meant last-minute switching of the two-person groups and usually an odd person left over. Some teams finished quickly, then distracted those still working, and some teams didn't finish within the short, fifty-minute time frame of a single class period. When I asked my students how they felt about peer response sessions, their responses were surprisingly candid and enlightening:

- From Micah (all students chose pseudonyms):
"When you put me with [Elsbeth], or any other writer better than me, I don't know what to say - how to help them."
- From Juliet: "Every time we do this [peer response session] I see that I have so much work to do, when I thought I was done, that I want to give up and just hand in my rough draft."
- From Romeo: "I think peer response is really helpful because when I just hand in a paper, thinking it's pretty good, when I get it back I see all sorts of mistakes I made - leaving words out, and just typing [word processing] mistakes. When we do peer response, I hear my mistakes, and I get a chance to fix them before I hand them in. My sloppy writing is stunning."

- From Micah again: “When I ask for help [during peer response sessions] I don’t get helpful answers or answers that I’m looking for. Maybe I don’t really know the right questions to ask.”
- From Gwendolyn: “You really have to trust the person you’re reading to. Sometimes I pick a topic that’s really emotional for me - one that I feel really strongly about - but I always have to think, “Do I want the kids to know about this?” If we could pick the person to read to, instead of you picking them, I wouldn’t be tied in knots about reading to others.”

After evaluating the students’ mixed comments, I decided to re-teach the specifics of what the students decided they needed to focus on during peer response, and to explore team size in order to streamline the process so that more student groups finish. In addition, I think that Gwendolyn’s comment is really important. Can I allow the students to choose their own groups in order to improve the students’ overall experience?

What improvements could be made to the process?

I chose two graphic organizers summarizing the elements of good writing, and decided to experiment with various sized response teams in order to discern best practice. And, how better to identify best practice than to ask the students themselves? They would tell me what worked. And, to give them an opportunity to show me, I began with an experiment wherein each student received two separate responses to his or her writing.

In my research of what had worked for other educators, I found a 2004 article, “Peer Review Times Two,” where Denise Marchionda posited two separate responses stating, “For me, the Two-Peer Editing Strategy has advantages over the alternatives: a teacher-only reading, single-peer editing, and group-response editing” (para. 2). I decided to try her strategy of two students separately reviewing each draft using a clean copy on which to make their comments, before orally presenting their suggestions. Marchionda’s rationale for two separate responses was that responders wouldn’t be influenced by each other and would usually respond to different criteria in the writing. I assumed that of the two responses, at least one would offer viable suggestions for improvement. I knew from experience that written comments as well as oral com-

ments were necessary. The written responses could be saved until later when the student revised his or her draft, and the oral responses were necessary to explain the written ones. I used a rotation system for response day, moving the unprepared students out of the rotation at the last minute, which again wasted valuable class time.

In other words, the rotation system took too much time. Student teams worked at different speeds, and the process with two separate responses couldn’t be completed in a fifty-minute period. Many students expressed frustration because either they felt that their writing didn’t receive an adequate response or, because of waiting for the next rotation, some students didn’t receive two responses. Romeo had a different perspective:

- From Romeo: “When I had to read the whole thing twice, [as Marchionda’s strategy requires], I got worn out by the end of the second time through, and didn’t listen as carefully to their comments the second time.”

Romeo’s comments encouraged me to continue experimenting with group size, and so I decided to try Peter Elbow’s format of a six- or seven-person group, as referenced in Anne Marie Liebel’s 2005 NWP article, “Elbow Room: Tweaking Response in the Secondary Classroom.” However, this group format was not the right fit for my junior and senior classes either. The vociferous responders monopolized the floor while the less confident ones sat silently. Surprisingly, I heard almost exclusively feminine responses. While in the two person groups everyone was forced to comment, in the larger group the males seemed to feel that their responses weren’t necessary. The large group format, like the two-person rotation, was not as effective as the students needed, as their comments suggest:

- From Jo: “I really didn’t like reading my writing to the big group [from the seven person response group]. I was embarrassed ‘cause they couldn’t understand me [my English] so they didn’t make many helpful comments. I really want help with my grammar, and the big group didn’t lend itself to my specific need.”
- From Levi: “I’ve gotten better at telling other people what I think about what they wrote, but I’m not comfortable talking in that big group. I’m not sure I can explain my ideas clearly.”

Three to Get Ready: Students Justify Peer Response in the Crowded Curriculum

I realized that in addition to further adjustments to group size, it was time to review specific, helpful suggestions for revision. I handed out copies of “Evaluation Criteria Checklist: Two Sides of the Equation,” which I had found in *Lesson Plans for Teaching Writing*, (p. 34-5), edited by Chris Jennings Dixon. I also distributed a South Dakota Department of Education publication, “Six Plus One-Trait Writing ONE PAGER.” On the day before my next planned peer response session, we discussed the criteria in the hand-outs and students voted as a group to focus on Content/Ideas and Organization. They felt that these two areas, in general, needed the most work in their writing. They begin using the language of the hand-outs in the next day’s response session, and I was again reminded that a combination of oral instruction (our discussion from the previous day) and written reminders (the hand-outs) creates the best reinforcement.

In addition, for the next day’s peer response session I decided to change to three-person response teams. Three-person teams would help to address potential absenteeism. In addition, this size group fit the guidelines for the next writing assignment. The assignment required that the students read George Orwell’s short story, “Shooting an Elephant,” and choose a topic from a short list: Orwell’s view of British Imperialism, Orwell’s view of the Burmese, or Orwell’s view of Death and Killing. By dividing the students into groups of three, each student would have a different topic. I observed and took notes during the session.

Karl to Micah: “I think you have a good opening sentence. Do you think this sentence [points to one in Micah’s essay] might be irrelevant? It’s kind of an obvious truth.” [Micah agrees and they discuss rewording.]

Elsbeth to Micah: “Why do you say, “Now ...” so many times in this essay? Is that needed?”

Micah: “That’s how I talk. Isn’t that ‘voice’?”

Elsbeth: “Oh, I didn’t think of that. Maybe you’re right. Look, I circled the word every time you used it.”

Micah: “Wow! I didn’t realize I said that so many times. You’re right. It’s too much. Too much ‘voice.’” [Both laugh].

Levi to Juliet: “What is your thesis here? Your support paragraphs say the same thing twice, but I’m not sure which topic you’re talking about.”

Juliet: “You’re saying I have to rewrite the whole thing.”

Levi: “No I’m not. Which point of Orwell’s is your main point? Your support paragraphs talk about how you think it’s wrong to kill people. Is that what you think Orwell is saying? I think if you use that as your thesis, and then, for another support paragraph use some of his words from the story, your essay will be lots stronger. Your conclusion is good, as long as you add a sentence about what Orwell thinks.” [Juliet’s angry look subsides, and she begins questioning Levi further and taking notes.]

Jo to Eric: “This is a argumentative essay, right? Did you remember a counterargument?”

Eric: “This is supposed to be persuasive? I thought we were supposed to just look at Orwell’s view of a particular topic.”

Jo: “Oh, maybe you’re right. Maybe a counterargument isn’t needed.” [Both students call me over for a conference.]

Eric and Maggie to Jo: “Are you ready to tackle the grammar?”

Jo: “Yup. I know it needs help.” [Both students offer suggestions and Jo writes furiously.]

Looking back over my observation recordings, I see that the students did focus on Content/Ideas and Organization from the handouts. I also note that the give and take in the classroom is more relaxed than I expected. Thinking back to Gwendolyn’s comment about the need to trust, I think I’m seeing that trust in action.

What do the experts say?

Overall, I believe that both the format of the three-person group size and the focus on Content/Ideas and Organization have honed the peer response tool to improve student writing. While some of the groups had members who were absent, all of the students present read their essays and received two written marginalia responses with oral back-up. I observe many of the students using their hand-outs to make comments. The following day, I ask the juniors and seniors to discuss their response to the previous day’s session, and their comments fell into three broad categories.

Student comments about content

- From Eric: “I could see where I needed more examples. I thought I had enough, but when both guys said one part wasn’t clear, I saw that I was expecting them to get it, but that an example would help.”

- From Anna: “By us focusing on content, I got some really good input. I also heard a totally different perspective from my team’s response to what I had written. It was a point of view that I hadn’t thought about before.”
- From Drew: “I usually wander around in my writing and get off-topic, but my group members both helped me see what wasn’t necessary, so I could focus better. I liked having two [responders] at the same time ‘cause they backed each other up and I could get it over with faster.”

Student comments about emotional comfort

- From Elspeth: “I can’t believe how different my essay sounds when I read it aloud, compared to when I just write it. Having a compassionate audience really helps.”
- From Gwendolyn: “I felt like I was developing a deeper relationship with my team - not only to my writing, but also to my personal feelings and emotions. I think peer response is really helpful.”
- From Levi [with a grin]: “This is forcing me to write a rough draft. Before, you’d tell us to, but I’d only write the final one. Now I have to, and my team helps me see what to improve.”
- From Jo: “I agree with Levi. I wasn’t reading my essay after I finished writing it, so when I’m reading it during peer response, I can hear my mistakes, so I can fix them. I think my grade should really improve, hint, hint.” [Everybody laughs.]

Student comments about process

- From Micah: “I’ve learned a lot about intros, conclusions, adding more info into the body paragraphs. My organization has gotten better, and I can think of more things to say.”
- From Jo again: “I love being able to add ‘voice’ to my introductions and conclusions. I never was able to do that before, but my team encouraged me to write with more passion, and now, after we’ve done this [peer response sessions] several times, I’m really comfortable with adding ‘me’ to the essay. Now, writing a formal essay without any ‘voice’ seems boring.”

- From Levi [again]: “You know, as a responder it’s hard to remember what you want to say when they read the whole thing at once. If I try to write while they’re reading, I get behind. Is there a way we [they] could read just part, like maybe just the intro and then we write, and then they read the rest?” [As a class, we decided to try Levi’s strategy in the next peer response session].

Two weeks later, the class has finished reading *Oedipus Rex* aloud, has chosen their topic - A Fatal Mistake, A Tragic Flaw, or “10 Elements of a Classical Tragedy,” a classroom tool developed by Sharon Murchie at Bath High School, Bath MI - and has written a rough draft. It’s peer response day, and I have allowed the students to choose their three-person teams. Although it is still first hour, every student is present and prepared. Flash back to the opening paragraph of this article. The discussion is intense, relevant and constructive. The class implements Levi’s suggestion and writers read only their introduction in their three-person group, and then follow with the balance of their essay. The session is an unqualified success, and the students ask to use peer response during their next writing assignment, because they can see the improvement in their writing.

And my decision is...

In my small, rural school, several factors influenced my final decision to keep using peer response as a revision tool. According to oral comments from my students, peer response sessions are very helpful. More specifically, students report that they have improved in their ability to respond effectively to their peers’ writing since they’ve had more instruction and practice. The students encourage each other, stating what is good about the writing, as well as what needs improvement. Peer response sessions also validate the authors’ writing to themselves, as well, because their concept of themselves as writers has improved. This confirmation seems to spur most students to revise. I also notice that because the students must make revisions, their writing improves, and their assessed grade in writing rises, which further validates their efforts.

I believe that using precious teaching time for peer response sessions is valuable, even in a schedule with short periods. To make space in my crowded curriculum, I have chosen to eliminate a class novel and substitute a short story unit

Three to Get Ready: Students Justify Peer Response in the Crowded Curriculum

and a student choice novel, both of which will incorporate inquiry based writing responses, to facilitate peer response sessions. I will continue to conference individually with students, but on a more limited basis as they become more comfortable with peer response, unless they ask me specifically for input. The three-person groups better allow for absenteeism and unpreparedness while giving each writer valuable input from his peers before teacher evaluation. By implementing a three-person team and best practice strategies, peer response has become a positive experience for us all.

Note: I wish to thank the Chippewa River Writing Project. As a 2009 graduate of the inaugural Summer Institute, I conducted the research to complete this work. The article came about through participation in a year-long CRWP continuity series.

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